Asbestos Risks in Homes

What is Asbestos?

Asbestos is a mineral that can be found on just about every continent, and has been used for centuries for a variety of purposes. Asbestos is found in the form of long thin fibers that are very easy to work with. Some of the qualities that make asbestos so appealing include its fire and heat resistance, its inability to conduct electricity, its inability to react with most chemicals and the way it can dampen sound.

It really began to be heavily used when the age of industry got rolling in the late 1800s and it was used in many different products. A few of the industries that are known to be hotspots for asbestos include power plants, chemical plants and ship builders. While asbestos was most often used to insulate pipes and even some machines, you can find asbestos containing materials (ACMs) all over the place. The construction industry used asbestos in a bunch of different products that were used in both commercial and residential properties.

So, Where Might You Find It?

If you've got an older house, there are some specific areas that you are going to want to check for asbestos. The first is going to be the plumbing system, especially the hot water pipes. If the pipes are wrapped in what looks like a thick white tape, it is most likely asbestos. Actually, there aren't any other, non-asbestos products that look like asbestos, so, you can probably be pretty sure that this is asbestos, but, the only way to be absolutely sure is to hire a professional to come in a perform an asbestos survey. Make sure not to disturb the insulation.

The outside of the house can also have some ACMs. Asbestos also adds to the strength of any product it's added to, which made it perfect for roofing shingles and some kinds of siding. Now, it is very likely that the roof on your house has been changed in the past thirty years. If you don't think it has, you are really going to need someone to check it out. If you think the siding on your house is made of asbestos, take a walk around and make sure none of the siding is ripped, torn or in any other way damaged. If it is, there may be a risk.

Asbestos may also have been added to the cement blocks that make up the foundation of your home. Sometimes the mortar included it, too. If the blocks aren't cracked or broken and the mortar is solid, you may not be in too much trouble. Make sure that the blocks are well painted and that the paint isn't peeling.

Another place to look at inside the house is the walls. Wallboard often had asbestos used in its manufacture. Again, the ability of asbestos to add to the fire resistance and strength of any products, while allowing them to be lightweight, was ideal for these products. If there is texture on the walls, it might also be an ACM. The thread-like fibers made for a very decorative texture. Even some of the adhesives and filler had asbestos fibers included in the mixture.

There are just a couple of other places that you may find asbestos in an older home. Floor and ceiling tiles were strengthened with asbestos. And, slightly less common, there may be asbestos fibers in the countertops and the cabinet facings in the kitchen.

OK, What Are the Risks?

Asbestos is very dangerous for folks who are exposed to it. The fibers break off easily from the main chunk and float in the air like dust. When people walk through the infected area, they inhale and swallow the fibers. When that happens, the fibers stay lodged in the lungs. A small amount of the fibers may never cause enough damage to the lungs affect the person, but the longer the exposure, the more fibers that are inhaled. Over time, the fibers scratch up the insides of the lungs and create scar tissue. Once the scarring reaches a high enough level, the victim may begin to have problems catching their breath. The official medical term for this asbestos related disease is asbestosis.

Those who suffer from asbestosis can be treated, but they cannot be cured. In a lot of cases, though, someone with asbestosis can lead a fairly normal life, if it's caught early enough. However, some of the symptoms involve an increased risk of contracting lung cancer or an asbestos related cancer called mesothelioma. Asbestos fibers are a carcinogen that can cause tumors to form in the lining that covers and protects most of the vital organs in the chest and stomach, called the mesothelium. Once malignant mesothelioma has been diagnosed, the victims have an average lifespan of eighteen months.

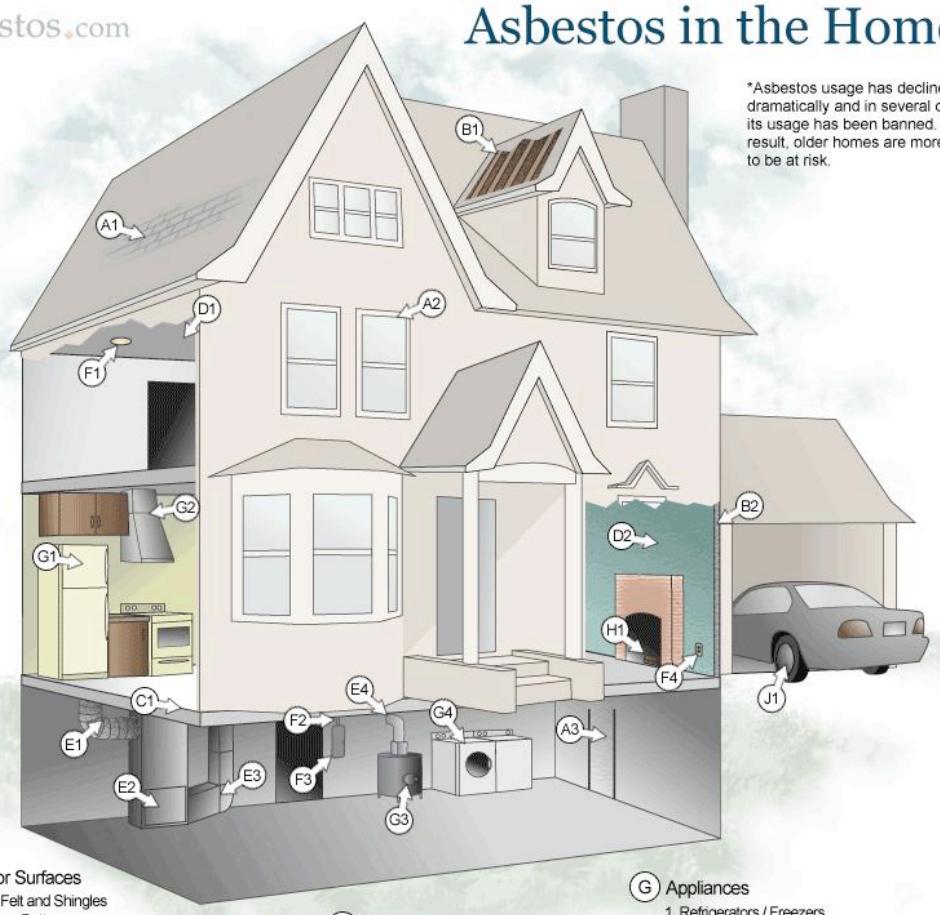
How Do I Get Rid of It?

Actually, there are two answers that apply to this question. The first is, don't mess with it if you don't have to. If the ACM is intact, the insulation all in one piece, the siding not chipped or cracked and the walls free of damage, simply leaving it alone will keep the asbestos from being released into the air, where it becomes a hazard. It's also possible to cover the material with paint or some other substance that will help keep the asbestos fibers contained.

The second suggestion is to let the professional handle it. Asbestos has become such a large issue and can be so dangerous that the Environmental Protection Agency has set up guidelines for its removal. In many states there are regulations put in place that only certified contractors can legally remove asbestos. If you absolutely have to have the asbestos removed, your best bet is to contact someone who has the knowledge and tools to do it safely.

Asbestos in the Home

*Asbestos usage has declined dramatically and in several cases, its usage has been banned. As a result, older homes are more likely to be at risk.



A Exterior Surfaces
1. Roof Felt and Shingles
2. Window Putty
3. Cement Asbestos Board Siding / Undersheeting

B Insulation
1. Vermiculite Insulation
2. Batt Insulation

C Flooring
1. Vinyl Asbestos Flooring Material

D Interior Surfaces
1. Sprayed-on Ceiling Material
2. Textured Paint

E Boilers, Heating and Piping
1. Heat Source Covering
2. Door Gaskets
3. Duct Lining
4. Wall Gaskets and Lining

F Electrical Equipment
1. Recessed Lighting
2. Wiring Insulation
3. Fuse Boxes
4. Outlets

G Appliances
1. Refrigerators / Freezers
2. Range Hoods
3. Woodstoves (Heat Reflectors)
4. Clothes Dryers

* Not Shown: Dishwashers, Toasters, Slow-cookers, Portable Heaters, Hair Dryers

H Miscellaneous
1. Fireplace Logs

J Automotive
1. Brake Linings, Gaskets, and Clutch Facings

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